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Erdogan sees 'ulterior motives' in U.S. case against gold trader



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan prepares for an interview in New York City, U.S. September 19, 2016. REUTERS/Brendan McDermid

By Ayla Jean Yackley | ISTANBUL

President Tayyip Erdogan believes U.S. federal attorneys had ulterior motives in including references to him and his wife in court papers related to their prosecution of a gold trader, Turkish media on Sunday quoted him as saying.

Reza Zarrab, a dual Turkish-Iranian national, was arrested in Miami in March. He was charged with helping Iran process millions of dollars in transactions that violated U.S. sanctions against Tehran in effect at the time.

The 33-year-old businessman, who lived in Turkey, remains in custody in New York. He has pleaded not guilty.

In court papers, U.S. Attorney for Manhattan Preet Bharara's office included references to a 2013 corruption investigation in Turkey that targeted Zarrab, cabinet ministers and members of Erdogan's family which was subsequently been dropped.

Private broadcaster NTV quoted Erdogan as telling a group of reporters he had raised Zarrab's detention in talks with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden in New York last week.

Erdogan said U.S. prosecutors were trying to implicate him by including in the indictment Zarrab's donations to an educational charity called Togem, according to NTV and other Turkish media.

"They are not pursuing the law. but are after a network of relationships. It's interesting

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-us-prosecution-idUSKCN11V0FR?il=0>

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they, without passing the day, set aside their relationship. It is interesting that the indictment refers to my wife setting up Togem and my ties with that association. My wife and I are not among the founders of that association.

"The effort to mention our names in court proves there are ulterior motives," he said.

Erdogan also accused U.S. officials involved in the case of traveling to Turkey as guests of a religious movement led by Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen.

Turkey classifies the movement, dubbed FETO, a terrorist organization that it blames for a failed military coup in July.

"The U.S. Department of Justice is being represented by people who were wined and dined by FETO. I told Biden this and he said he was unaware," Erdogan said.

A spokesman for Zarrab declined to comment. Benjamin Brafman, a lawyer for Zarrab, declined comment.

Zarrab's lawyers last month filed a motion asking the federal judge, Richard Berman, to recuse himself due to comments he made about Zarrab's prosecution in Turkey at a 2014 conference.

Turkey wants the United States to arrest Gulen, who resides in Pennsylvania, and return him to Turkey. Gulen, once a close ally of Erdogan, denies involvement in the coup attempt.

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Erdogan said he told Biden that Turkey's justice and economy ministries have investigated Zarrab and determined he was innocent, as had Iranian authorities.

He added that he would not remain "indifferent" to the detention of a Turkish national in the United States.

The arrest of Zarrab, a frequently photographed figure among Turkey's jetset, sent shockwaves through Turkey and cheered Erdogan's opponents who viewed the U.S. case as a blow to the Turkish leader, in power since 2003 as prime minister and, since 2014, as president.

Separately, newspapers on Sunday reported that Zarrab's wife, Turkish pop star Ebru Gundes, filed for divorce last week.

(Additional reporting by Nate Raymond in New York; Editing by Clelia Oziel)

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